

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 3621

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: PFOR, TH, US

SUBJ: VIEWS OF PRIME MINISTER SENI PRAMOT ON U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE
AND OTHER MATTERS

SUMMARY: IN WIDE-RANGING DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AMBASSADOR AND DCM MARCH 3, PRIMIN SENI PRAMOT APPEARED TIRED, DISCOURAGED AND BEATEN DOWN BY THE PROBLEMS OF TRYING TO FORM A VIABLE GOVERNMENT OUT OF THE CURRENT PARLIAMENTARY MESS. HE IS GRAVELY CONCERNED ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF WELL-FINANCED RADICAL LEFTISTS WHO ARE OUT TO END THE MONARCHY AND DISRUPT THAILAND'S RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES. HE SAID HE WAS UNDER IRRESISTABLE PRESSURE IN HIS CABINET AND HAD TO AGREE TO AN 18 MONTH TIMETABLE FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. MILITARY FORCES. HE SAID ONE REASON HE HAD NO ALTERNATIVE BUT TO YIELD TO THIS PRESSURE WAS GENERAL FEELING WITHIN THE CABINET THAT WE WILL NOT EVEN GIVE CAMBODIA THE MEANS TO DEFEND ITSELF, THAT WE WILL NOT HONOR OUR COMMITMENTS TO THAILAND AND THAT WE WOULD NOT AGAIN USE OUR FORCES HERE IN DEFENSE OF FREEDOM. END SUMMARY.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW THAI PRIME MINISTER SENI PRAMOT AND THE NEW FOREIGN MINISTER PICHAI RATTAKUN WERE DINNER GUESTS AT THE RESIDENCE MARCH 3. NEWS HAD LEAKED OUT LATE THAT AFTERNOON THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY STATEMENT INCLUDED
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A PROVISION FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF ALL FOREIGN TROOPS FROM

THAILAND WITHIN 28 MONTHS. BOTH THE AMBASSADOR AND THE DCM SEPARATELY HAD THE OCCASION TO DISCUSS THIS AND OTHER ISSUES WITH SENI DURING THE COURSE OF THE EVENING. END INTRODUCTION.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION.

1. SENI DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS "ONLY SEVEN-EIGHTHS OF A PRIME MINISTER" SINCE PARLIAMENT STILL HAS TO APPROVE HIS GOVERNMENT'S POLICY BEFORE IT COULD ASSUME FULL AUTHORITY. SENI FINDS HIMSELF IN A DIFFICULT AND TRYING SITUATION. HE IS UNDER PRESSURES FROM CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION FORCES, INCLUDING HIS OWN BROTHER; FROM STUDENT GROUPS, PROFESSORS AND HIGHLY-ORGANIZED RADICAL AGITATORS; AND FROM CONFLICTING VIEWS WITHIN HIS OWN CABINET. HE IS DISILLUSIONED BY THE EXPERIENCE OF TRYING TO FORM A GOVERNMENT OUT OF SUCH DIVERSITY. HE SAID IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS THAT HIS GOVERNMENT SUCCEED SINCE HIS PARTY RECEIVED THE LARGEST VOTE IN THE ELECTIONS. HE FELT IT WAS HIS "PATRIOTIC DUTY" TO DO WHAT HE COULD BUT WAS FINDING THE TASK EXTREMELY DIFFICULT.

2. ALTHOUGH SENI DECLINED TO SPECULATE WHETHER THE PARLIAMENT WOULD APPROVE HIS GOVERNMENT, HE SAID THAT, IF DEFEATED, HE WOULD NOT CALL FOR NEW ELECTIONS. OTHER ELEMENTS WOULD THEN HAVE A CHANCE TO FORM A GOVERNMENT. HIS BROTHER, KHUKRIT PRAMOT, AND THE THAI NATION PARTY WOULD PROBABLY BE THE FIRST TO TRY. IF THEY FAILED, THEN THE LEFTISTS WOULD HAVE A CHANCE. AT SOME POINT EVERYONE WOULD HAVE TO GIVE UP AND RECOMMEND TO THE KING THAT HE DISSOLVE THE PARLIAMENT TO MAKE WAY FOR NEW ELECTIONS. IF THE PARLIAMENT DEFEATS HIS GOVERNMENT MARCH 6 OR 7, THE CONSTITUTION NEVERTHELESS PROVIDES THAT IT STAY ON UNTIL A NEW GOVERNMENT TAKES ITS PLACE. HE IMPLIED THAT THIS PROCESS MIGHT TAKE SOME TIME.

PROBLEMS FACING THE GOVERNING.

3. IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION ABOUT THE PROBLEMS FACING HIS GOVERNMENT, SENI CITED THREE: THE ANTI-COMMUNIST ACT, TEMCO (SEPTTEL), AND IRRESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR OF THE LEFTIST OPPOSITION. SENI SAID THAT SOME MEMBERS OF HIS CABINET STRONGLY OPPOSED THE ANTI-COMMUNIST ACT. HE FAVORED SPECIAL LEGISLA-

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TION TO MAINTAIN INTERNAL SECURITY WITHOUT DIRECTING IT SPECIFICALLY AGAINST COMMUNISTS.

4. SENI REITERATED SEVERAL TIMES THAT HE FINDS HIMSELF IN A VERY DIFFICULT AND TRYING SITUATION. HE IS UNDER CONFLICTING PRESSURES WITHIN HIS OWN CABINET. HE IS UNDER ATTACK FROM THE CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION FORCES, INCLUDING HIS OWN BROTHER, AND ALSO FROM STUDENT GROUPS, PROFESSORS

AND A NETWORK OF HIGHLY ORGANIZED RADICAL AGITATORS. ACCORDING TO SENI, THE RADICAL AGITATION IS EXTREMELY WELL FINANCED. THERE IS LOTS OF MONEY AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT PARTICULAR PET CAUSES AND THERE IS CONSIDERABLE ORCHESTRATION OF THE AGITATION. THE COUNTRY-WIDE AGITATION AGAINST THE TEMCO TIN MINING LEASE, WHICH HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR SEVERAL MONTHS, PROVIDES A STRIKING AND PERSISTING EXAMPLE. SENI IS ALSO CONCERNED THAT THERE ARE IMPORTANT FACTIONS OPERATING ON THE LEFTWARD SIDE OF THE THAI POLITICAL SPECTRUM WHO REGARD THE MONARCHY AS AN OBSTACLE IN THE PATH OF THAILAND'S

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AND WOULD DO AWAY WITH THE INSTITUTION.

U.S. MILITARY WITHDRAWALS.

5. ASKED ABOUT THE 18-MONTH LIMITATION ON THE PRESENCE OF U.S. FORCES WHICH HAD BEEN ANNOUNCED THAT AFTERNOON, SENI SAID THE CABINET HAD INTENSIVELY DEBATED THE SUBJECT. HE HAD TRIED TO GET THE CABINET TO AGREE ON LANGUAGE IN THE POLICY STATEMENT THAT THE WITHDRAWAL WOULD TAKE PLACE "SOON" OR "QUICKLY." ALL OF THESE EFFORTS FAILED AND HE HAD TO SET A DEFINITE SCHEDULE TO HOLD HIS GOVERNMENT TOGETHER. EIGHTEEN MONTHS "WAS THE BEST HE COULD DO." WE TOLD HIM THAT THIS DECISION WAS MOST UNFORTUNATE IN TERMS OF OUR MUTUAL SECURITY OBJECTIVES. IT WOULD GREATLY UNDERCUT OUR CREDIBILITY AND THE PRESSURES WE ARE ABLE TO GENERATE ON HANOI, WHICH IS OBVIOUSLY CONCERNED ABOUT OUR PRESENCE. IT WOULD BE A TRAGEDY TO THROW AWAY THIS CARD WITHOUT EXTRACTING FIRM ASSURANCES FROM HANOI THAT IT WOULD LEAVE ITS NEIGHBORS IN PEACE. THIS TIMETABLE COULD MOREOVER UNDERCUT HOPES FOR A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT IN CAMBODIA AND HAVE A SERIOUS IMPACT ON THAILAND'S OWN SECURITY.

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6. SENI AGREED. HE HIMSELF IS GREATLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE SECURITY THREATS FROM INDOCHINA AND PARTICULARLY THE DETERIORATING SECURITY SITUATION IN CAMBODIA. HE STRESSED, HOWEVER, THAT 18 MONTHS WAS THE BEST HE COULD DO FACED WITH STRONG OPPOSITION BY YOUNG MEMBERS OF HIS OWN CABINET. HE SAID THE WORDING OF THE CLAUSE ON THIS SUBJECT IN THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY STATEMENT READS TO THE EFFECT THAT U.S. FORCES SHOULD BE WITHDRAWN AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE, WITH THAILAND'S "NATIONAL INTERESTS AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION," BUT NO LATER THAN 18 MONTHS. HE SAID IF SOMETHING HAPPENED IN THIS

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REGION WHICH GRAVELY THRETEBED THAILAND'S SECURITY, HE WOULD INVOKE THIS "NATIONAL INTEREST" PHRASE TO INSIST THAT U.S. FORCES REMAIN OR RETURN DESPITE THE 18-MONTH LIMITATION. HE NOTED THAT SOME CABINET MEMBERS FELT THERE WAS NO NEED TO KEEP U.S. TROOPS SITING HERE INDEFINITELY BUT THAT THEY SHOULD LEAVE UNDER ARRANGEMENTS IN WHICH THEY COULD RETURN IF THERE WERE ADVERSE SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS. WE TOLD SENI THAT DECISIONS ON OUR MILITARY PRESENCE WOULD STRONGLY AFFECT THE WAY IN WHICH WE MET OUR COMMITMENTS TO THAILAND IN THE FUTURE. IF WE HAD FORCES HERE IN THAILAND, THE CHANCES OF OUR EMPLOYING THESE FORCES FIRECTLY IN THAILAND'S DEFENSE WOULD BE FAR GREATER THAN IF WE HAD TO REINTRODUCE FORCES FROM OUTSIDE. SENI AGREED THAT THIS WAS UNDOUBTEDLY THE CASE.

7. SENI SAID THAT ONE OF THE MAJOR ARGUMENTS WITHIN THE CABINET AGAINST KEEPING OUR FORCES HERE WAS THE GENERAL FEELING THAT WE WOULD NOT USE THESE FORCES IN COMBAT AGAIN. MANY MEMBERS OF THE CABINET ALSO FELT WE WOULD NOT HELP THAILAND. U.S. FORCES WERE THUS "USELESS." CAUTIONING THAT HE WAS SPEAKING FRANKLY BETWEEN FRIENDS, SENI SAID HE HAD SPECIFICALLY ASKED DEFENSE MINISTER THAWIT SENIWONG NA AYUTTHAYA WHETHER HE THOUGHT U.S. FORCES HERE WOULD BE USED IN COMBAT AGAIN. THAWIT SAID HE DID NOT BELIEVE, GIVEN CURRENT ATTITUDES WITHIN THE U.S. AND IN THE U.S. CONGRESS,

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THAT WE WOULD USE THESE FORCES IN THAILAND'S DEFENSE OR TO INTERVENE IN INDOCHINA. MOREOVER, OUR AID TO THAILAND WAS RAPIDLY DECLINING.

8. SENI REITERATED THAT THE MAIN DIFFICULTY IS THAT PEOPLE DO NOT TRUST THE U.S. COMMITMENT. THEY SEE CAMBODIA ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER. THEY KNOW THE USG IS HAVING GREAT DIFFICULTY GETTING A RELATIVELY SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY FROM THE CONGRESS TO HELP THE CAMBODIANS DEFEND THEMSELVES. "HOW CAN WE BELIEVE YOU WILL INTERVENE MILITARILY?" IF THE U.S. CONGRESS DOES NOT VOTE SUPPLEMENTAL AID FOR CAMBODIA, HE BELIEVES THE FALL OF THE LON NOL GOVERNMENT IS ALMOST INEVITABLE. HE IS ALSO CONCERNED THAT THE U.S. CONGRESS MAY NOT PROVIDE ANY ADDITIONAL SUPPORT TO THAILAND TO BOLSTER ITS DEFENSES IF CAMBODIA SHOULD FALL. SEVERAL TIMES HE SAID IF HE COULD DEPEND ON "YOUR CONGRESS" HE WOULD BE ABLE TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY.

9. WE TOLD HIM THAT PREMATURE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. FORCES WAS THE BEST WAY TO INSURE THAT EXACTLY THE SORT OF THING GOING ON IN CAMBODIA MIGHT HAPPEN IN THAILAND. SENI AGREED BUT RETREATED INTO A DISCUSSION OF POPULAR CONCERN ABOUT THAILAND GETTING INVOLVED IN CAMBODIAN AFFAIRS. HE SAID FOREIGN MINISTER PHICHAH HAD RECEIVED STRONG ATTACKS BOTH WITHIN THE CABINET AND OUTSIDE FOR HIS RECENT STATEMENT OF CONCERN ABOUT DEVELOPMENTS IN CAMBODIA.

10. IN RESPONSE TO FURTHER PROBING ON WHETHER HE FELT HE WOULD HAVE TO LIVE UP TO THIS 18-MONTH COMMITMENT, SENI SAID HE DEFINITELY WOULD SINCE THIS WAS THE BASIC POLICY OF HIS GOVERNMENT. IF PARLIAMENT APPROVED IT, THEN HE WOULD HAVE TO ABIDE BY IT UNLESS AND UNTIL SOMETHING HAPPEND TO MAKE THE GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT CHANGE ITS MIND. HE AGAIN CITED THE "NATIONAL INTEREST" PHRASE IN THE POLICY STATEMENT AS SOMETHING WHICH OPENED THE DOOR AND CONCLUDED BY SAYING, "WE'LL HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE."

11. AT ONE POINT IN HIS CONVERSATION, SENI SAID THAT U.S. INTERESTS IN THAILAND WERE LARGELY A DERIVATIVE OF U.S. ACTIVITIES IN INDOCHINA. SENI SAID THAT THIS WAS APPARENT IF ONE COMPARED THE VAST EXPENDITURES WHICH WE HAD MADE IN
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VIETNAM, CAMBODIA AND LAOS WITH THE RELATIVELY SMALL ASSISTANCE THAILAND HAS RECEIVED FROM THE U.S. IN THE LAST QUARTER OF A CENTURY. IN REPLY I TOLD HIM THAT WE HAD GIVEN SOME \$2 BILLION IN DIRECT MILITARY AND ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE DURING THAT PERIOD WHICH WAS NOT AN INCONSIDERABLE SUM. I FURTHER POINTED OUT THAT THERE WAS SOME CORRELATION BETWEEN

THE U.S. INVOLVEMENT AND PRESENCE IN THAILAND AND THE FACT THAT THAILAND HAD SUFFERED LESS FROM INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES THAN ANY OF ITS IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORS.

12. COMMENT:

A. SENI PRAMOT IS AN OVERWORKED, TIRED, AND FAIRLY DISCOURAGED MAN. LIKE MOT THAI, HE WOULD PREFER UNER IDEAL CONDITIONS NOT TO HAVE FOREIGN TROOPS IN THAILAND. HE SEES CURRENT ADVANTAGES IN OUR PRESENCE, HOWEVER, AND HE LIKES AMERICANS AND SHARES MOT OF OUR VIEWS ON THE SITUATION IN THIS AREA. HE PROBABLY WOULD PREFER TO BE FLEXIBLE ON THIS MATTER BUT IS UNDER STRONG PRESSURE FROM YOUNGER MEMBERS OF HIS CABINET WHO EITHER OPPOSE U.S. PRESENCE ON PRINCIPLE, OR FEEL IT NECESSARY FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO SET A FIRM TIMETABLE ON PRACTICAL POLITICAL GROUNDS.

B. OUR DIFFICULTY IN GETTING AID FOR CAMBODIA INCREASES THE BELIEF BY MORE ACTIVIST MEMBERS OF SENI'S GOVERNMENT THAT WE WIL NOT USE OUR FORCES HERE IN COMBAT AND THAT THEIR PRESENCE HAS LITTLE, IF ANY, BENEFIT FOR THAILAND. SENI DOE, HWEVER, LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN FOR RECONSIDERING THE 18-MONTH DEADLINE IF NECESSARY IN THE FUTURE BECAUSE OF EVENTS WHICH WOULD ADVERSELY AFFECT THAILAND'S NATIONAL INTERESTS.

C. BARRING A SERIOUS AND DIRECT THREAT TO THAILAND'S SECURITY, AS WELL AS FIRM INDICATIONS THAT WE WILL USE OUR FORCES IN THAILAND'S DEFENSE, THIS GOVERNMENT--IF IT SURVIVES--WILL HAVE DIFFICULTY IN BACKING OFF FROM THE COMMITMENT IN THE POLICY STATEMENT. A SUCCESSOR GOVERNMENT WOULD FIND DIFFICULTY IN BEING LESS NATIONALISTIC ON THIS ISSUE THAN THE DEMOCRATS, AND COULD EVEN TRY TO ONE-UP THEM. THE CHAT THAI PARTY, FOR EXAMPLE, HAS ALREADY COME OUT PUBLICLY IN FAVOR OF TOTAL WITHDRAWAL OF OUR FORCES WITHIN ONE YEAR.

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13. CHANCES OF THE SENI GOVERNMENT GETTING A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE LATER THIS WEEK AND SURVIVING FOR NAY EXTENDED TIME ARE NO BETTER THAN ABOUT 50-50. HOWEVER, WE WILL NEED TO BE PREPARED TO OPEN FORMAL DISCUSSIONS WITH HIM ON OUR FORCE LEVELS SOON AFTER THE PARLIAMENTARY VOTE (IF HE MAKES IT). WE SEE NO CHANCE AT THIS TIME THAT WE CAN TURN AROUND THIS 18-MONTH DECISION, WHICH IS DESIGNED TO HELP THE GOVERNMENT SQUEEK THROUGH THE VOTE. IN A SEPARATE TELEGRAM WITHIN THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS WE WILL SET FORTH OUR VIEWS ON THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE THIS NEW DEVELOPMENT.
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